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Trainee teachers' engagement in a cross-curricular news project: impact on professional identity

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On 7th September at BERA, the above ITTE members presented the findings from their ITTE evaluation project, funded by the TDA into the impact of the BBC News School Report project on trainee teachers.

In short, the project found that the professional identity of trainee teachers, is, in part, defined by their relationship to those who mentor and tutor them. As teachers in training they are in a role with less power than those who are responsible for their training, support and development.

The ITTE evaluation focused on the impact of trainee teachers' engagement in the BBC News School Report project and how this helped to form their professional identity. This was examined through the roles taken by trainee teachers in the project while on placement in schools, the activities they were consequently engaged in and the types of evidence generated for their assessment against the Standards for Qualified Teachers in England.

The evaluation of the project for Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the government agency responsible for teacher training in England, involved the following instruments of data collection - surveys, focus groups and written reports. Respondents included trainee teachers themselves, their tutors as representatives of teacher education providers and their mentors as representatives of schools in which they were placed. The methodological approach was interpretative and phenomenological with qualitative and quantitative data being analysed for emergent themes.

The paper presented at BERA focused on one of the themes found, that of the impact on the professional identity of trainee teachers exposed to taking up leadership roles. The research showed that their professional identity is enhanced through their being in a leading role in respect of curriculum and working with other staff. Their self perception of role was modified to one in which they saw themselves, and were seen, as equals to qualified staff rather than subservient or dependent on them. Furthermore, engagement in such projects led them to collecting richer, more holistic evidence for meeting the Standards as they took greater ownership for this process, situating it in their leading role in the project. Their identity became defined less by the articulation of Standards and by their relationship to others and more by their own notions of professionalism. A new more equal power relationship developed as they took on responsibility for the project.

Project outline

The BBC News School Report is an annual project which aims to engage 11-14 year olds with news by helping them to set their own editorial agenda for a real audience (BBC, 2011a). Resources, including six lesson plans explaining the basics of journalism, are available on the School Report website¹. Schools taking part work towards a national deadline on the news day in March. On this day all the secondary schools involved became broadcasters and simultaneously publish

video, audio or text-based news on their school websites. The BBC News School Report site links all the school sites together using an interactive map, and all BBC platforms – including Radio 4, BBC 1, BBC News 24 and regional news and radio – feature samples of students' work from around the country, driving a real audience to all of the work featured on the BBC site. In 2008 nearly 300 schools participated (ITTE, 2009). By 2011 this had risen to over 800 (BBC, 2011b).

The 2010/11 academic year was the fourth in which the TDA worked with the BBC on News School Report and provided funding to ITT providers to support their engagement with it. This funding was to enable working across the partnership and to provide assistant teachers access to training by the BBC. This was necessary as the normal BBC project model was that a school would take part (independently of other schools and HEIs) and in doing so the BBC had a lead teacher named in each of the participating schools.

For the ITE provider, however, engagement in the project meant there was a more complex interaction between stakeholders. Providers themselves liaised both with the BBC and with the schools in which participant assistant teachers were placed. The lead teacher contact for the BBC in a school was, in some cases, the assistant teacher. This resulted in a complex set of stakeholders in the use of the project in ITE – assistant teachers, schools, providers, students in schools, BBC, TDA.

Findings from the case study schools

School A

The ITT model at school A was an employment-based graduate teacher programme. Assistant teachers were placed at the school for the majority of their training year. The project co-ordinator was a newly qualified teacher (NQT) who had been a GTP assistant teacher the year before and participated in the BBC NSRP as a assistant teacher. The NQT was an English teacher and she used her English class as the participants in the project this year. The pupils participating were one Year 9 English class who had three days off timetable for the project:

- Day 1 was a 'workshop' day. Three workshops were delivered by the assistant teachers, focusing on the skills required for the live day.
- Day 2 was a 'practice' day, where the pupils rehearsed in preparation for the 'live' day event.
- Day 3 was the 'live' day event, with news reported live on the day and uploaded onto the website.

All the assistant teachers in School A reported that they noted an improvement in their relationship with pupils as a result of being involved in the project. This had already taken effect prior to the live day due to their involvement in the workshops. They attributed this to extracurricular nature of the project, the situation requiring a more open approach to the pupils and the pupils' positive response to the challenge of the demanding situation. They all reported an increased respect for the assistant teachers from the pupils.

Assistant teachers reported that they felt more confident in using a variety of approaches and teaching styles as a result of being involved in this project. They felt more free to take risks in their approach and have fun. The assistant teachers reported that they became more relaxed and confident in their teaching as a result of their involvement with the project.

The drama assistant teacher reported that she felt much more confident in taking

pupils out of school when she observed the improvement in their behaviour on a trip out to the local BBC radio station. She felt much more able to trust the pupils, having been very under confident about how she would manage the pupils before they went.

The school mentors reported that the assistant teachers "...gained confidence through peer observation, feedback and risk taking. Trainees see each other teaching and value what they see. This improves [assistant teachers] confidence when hearing the feedback. [As a result of team teaching in the workshops] 'them' and 'us' barriers [between assistant teachers and mentors] were broken down."

School B

The ITT model at school B was assistant teachers taking a PGCE qualification placed at the school by an HEI provider. This was their main placement and they had been in another school when the project was initially launched. The assistant teachers were English specialists with concomitant foci on English, drama and media as part of their training and their teaching practice. The project co-ordinator was the media studies lead teacher in the school, who also had a background in broadcast media.

The mentor had arranged for the assistant teachers to take part in the BBC NSRP assisting the lead teacher in working with a small number of selected pupils. The project was focused on in depth work with a few year 9 pupils to produce high quality output. This was done as an extra-curricular activity.

Assistant teachers in School B reported that it was useful to work with pupils they didn't teach. This was reinforced by the mentor and lead teacher. The mentor also added that where there were pupils on the project who were also in classes taught by assistant teachers it was useful for them to see each other in a different context. In particular, the mentor observed that pupils who were difficult in class responded better to the assistant teachers as they had seen them in a different context. The case of a boy who shone in the project but was not easy to teach in the classroom was cited. "He would see the assistant teachers in a different light", the mentor said. Assistant teachers, however, reported that they had not learnt anything about working with difficult pupils as they "had them in their classes". Assistant teachers had been in other schools before the project started and had been involved in other extra-curricular activities. They confirmed that this type of activity brings the benefit of working with a wider range of pupils.

The assistant teachers in School B only had regular contact with one teacher (the lead). They also got to know a governor through the project but it did not involve any additional interactions with the school leadership. They saw that the experience would be seen positively on job applications/CVs and they would be willing to take a lead in it. They saw its importance in providing experience of learning in a project that was extra curricular, national, fun and had a product at the end.

"Any school leadership team should look on a teachers' involvement in the project as a very positive thing" (pre questionnaire).

The mentor concurred with this view, adding that through such extra-curricular experience, pupils see them in a different light. It was also seen as preparation for the assistant teachers' involvement in other extra-curricular events – trips, open evening. This was seen as helping them to meet the standards for QTS. The

mentor said that it “Help[ed] us to view them as part of the department” and that, as NQTs they will be able to “take the lead in running” the BBC NRSP.

Working on the project was seen as “provid[ing] evidence that they have worked in wider school activities [and of] linking into wider world and other subjects”. This was seen as crucial for the standards. It was also felt by the mentor that working on the project makes assistant teachers feel valued and valuable to the department and school and that assistant teachers often have more flexibility (if not more time) to take part in such projects than teachers.

School C

The ITT model at school A was school-based GTP. Assistant teachers were placed at the school for the majority of their training year. The assistant teachers were English specialists with concomitant foci on English, drama and media as part of their training year. The project co-ordinator had previously been an assistant teacher at the school who had taken part in the BBC NRSP. This was a third year in which this ‘cascade’ model had operated with assistant teachers from previous years being appointed and then co-ordinating the project with new assistant teachers. The assistant teachers had responsibility for leading the project.

The project was run as an extra-curricular activity with assistant teachers and pupils working on it in school and in the adjacent City Learning Centre. One of the assistant teachers had previous experience of working in the broadcast media. Assistant teachers chose the class to work on the project and they had a whole day to prepare, extra curriculum time and then the live news day. Pupils involved in the project ranged from year 7 to year 9.

Assistant teachers in School C reported that the project gave them an opportunity to think about matching media resources to pupil needs in a way that was not dictated to by the formal curriculum. The mentor reported that there were different interactions with the pupils on the project than in normal classes. These were to do with working with small groups (which one assistant teacher had previous experience of as she had previously been employed as a learning support assistant in the school).

Links were made with the City Learning Centre and local media organisations. This was seen as both a benefit for the authentic learning in the project – the links were with real journalists and a video company – and also for the school itself as a stakeholder in the local community.

An assistant teacher reported that the project gave the opportunity to “raise my profile” with these partners and, by extension, with colleagues in the department who saw her taking a lead and using her own initiative to make links outside of school. She had been given an opportunity for making these links and the responsibility for doing it. These opportunities were not ones that would have occurred without the project. Being involved in the project “puts [trainees] on the map” and was something that was noticed by the headteacher who reported their work to the whole school.

The mentor concurred that the project provided opportunities for assistant teachers to “take control” rather than being handed tasks to do. It also allowed the assistant teacher who had professional media experience to translate this to the school context. In talking about the project and the way in which assistant teachers were perceived by the school leadership, the mentor said that “the headteacher was more aware of who they were and their progress [than of other graduate trainees] because of it”. Assistant teachers worked with “people they

wouldn't normally have [had] contact with" including ASTs and the leader of applied learning. A mathematics teacher used the material produced in a tutor period as it was so impressive.

The school has an activities fortnight at the end of the school year. Assistant teachers would be able to bring the experiences of the project to helping plan and lead activities in the department and across the curriculum.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the three years of research into the involvement of ITE providers in the BBC NSRP, the value of the project to both the formal curriculum of assessment for QTS and the development of professional identity, has emerged as a significant finding. This has been achieved for a very small input of supporting funds from the TDA. Such support is no longer available perhaps reflecting a more focused budget on core ITE activity. It is the authors' contention that given the benefits found in the research such a move is regrettable.

If teachers in training are given roles of responsibility in such projects then their self-perception of role is modified to one in which they see themselves, and are seen, as equals to qualified staff rather than subservient or dependent on them. Furthermore, engagement in such projects leads to them collecting richer, more holistic evidence for meeting the Standards as they take greater ownership for this process, situating it in their leading role in the project. Their identity becomes defined less by the articulation of Standards and by their relationship to others and more by their own notions of professionalism.

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